

# THE COMMUNITY OF DESIGN / THE DESIGN OF COMMUNITY: AN EMAIL DIALOGUE

Sheila Levrant de Bretteville and Bia Lowe

Dear Bia:

*It is a bright, crisp, sunny day. I am working on my public art project for 207th Street,<sup>1</sup> working still with some of the same notions regarding participatory democracy and design with which I formed the Women's Design Program in 1971 and the Woman's Building [in 1973].<sup>2</sup> The neighborhood around the A train subway stop as an expression of everyday life over time is the subject there, and the participants are of different classes, genders, and ethnicities.*

*I'd like to propose a "conversation" with you via e-mail regarding our days at the Woman's Building. I am very interested in those moments when we were both in the same place at the same time and where our memories of an event overlap and diverge, as well as where our interpretations are alike and different. Can we find those nodes? And then coalesce our comments around them?*

*Part of my interest in doing this with you is that you were there in 1971 in the Women's Design Program at CalArts, and in 1973 in the Feminist Studio Workshop, and then the Women's Graphic Center at the Woman's Building. It seems to me that we have a special opportunity to look at our differences and similarities, and see whether we are able to locate convergence or divergence to traditional categories of age, class, or sexual preference.*

*Tell me what you think.*

*Love,*

*Sheila*

Images and words that reflect the authentic and varied life experiences of women are seldom valued or visible in public, printed communications, undermining our connection to the dominant culture.

Lacking the graphic skills valued by that culture limits access to professional work and the skills developed within women's subculture are rendered unavailable to society at large.

Women's Graphic Center's classes, presses, galleries and outreach network provide a uniquely supportive community in which you can discover, explore, and communicate your experience, as a woman. For 6 years women have been designing and printing books, posters, and postcards at the Women's Graphic Center. By encouraging women to maintain ethnic and sexual identity in graphic communications, the personal connection to work is made, creating a bridge between private experience and the public world.

## Speak your own language

Writing, artmaking, design and printing are taught by professional women, providing a necessary link to job related information.

### WGC Core Faculty

Sheila Levrant de Bretteville  
Eloise Klein Healy  
Susan King  
Sue Maberry  
Mary McNally  
Cynthia Marsh

### 1980 Visiting Artists

Frances Butler  
April Greiman  
Judy Hofberg  
Deena Metzger  
Jane Rosenzweig  
Betye Saar  
Deborah Sussman  
Kathy Walkup  
Teresa Woodwood  
Linda Vallejo

### I've got things to say

Please send me more information

name \_\_\_\_\_  
address \_\_\_\_\_  
city \_\_\_\_\_ state \_\_\_\_\_ zip code \_\_\_\_\_  
phone \_\_\_\_\_

Women's Graphic Center  
at the Woman's Building  
1727 N. Spring Street  
Los Angeles, CA 90012  
213 221-6161

Dear Sheila,  
You're on!

I met you at CalArts when I was twenty—a young twenty, very passive, insecure, a virgin. I fancied myself as creative but didn't trust my own ability to make forms. Feminism challenged the prevailing psychological model of being female, and gave me a radically new insight into my gender, my sexuality, my fear of my own powers. I was ready for the Women's Movement, and in particular, an intelligent community of women who would delve into "consciousness-raising" as well as (excuse the jargon) find empowerment through the process of form making. And, there you were. The Women's Design Program was custom-made for any woman whose feminism had a cultural bent, whose sense of self-in-the-world could be nurtured through creative work and a grounding of feminist analysis.

Your first design assignment had us begin with two rudimentary materials: an Avery dot label and a blank piece of paper—one unit, a singularity, a self against a ground. Slowly we were to add more dots to the paper, to discover the resonance of one thing to another, and then, of course, to consider the whole. From there we each took our composition of dots and reduced it photographically, making sixteen reproductions. From those, we worked within a grid to assemble a quilt of our dot images. Each in turn could be reduced and reproduced sixteen times, to assemble more and more intricate compositions, as many times as we wished. Like the Eames's film, *Powers of Ten*, some of the results looked like clusters of supernovas, while others coiled like strands of jewel-like DNA.

In the process, we learned a great deal about photo reproduction, and saw how design, rather than being a formidable realm controlled by an unseen Oz, is simple assemblage: a human satisfaction, completely within our grasp. From there it was not difficult to extrapolate to other designed realms, say fashion, architecture, city planning and beyond to the subtle, and not-so-subtle, elements that influence our lives as women. If we wanted to change the world, indeed, our own lives, what aspect of the culture, of public life, could we influence through creative work?

A bit of alchemy, something of the empowerment I was hoping to find, happened with your next assignment. We were to choose a text—something particularly pleasing or disturbing—and manipulate it using the design and conceptual skills we had learned in the previous exercise. I chose a passage from *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, the rape of the character Tralala. I first took my photo reproduction of the text and cut it up so that all the words related to the victim (Tralala, her clothes and body parts) made up a sphere, while all the predicates (the rapists, their body parts, their actions, and their implements) composed a kind of arrow bearing down on the sphere. This solution seemed simplistic, too literal. I wanted to go deeper. I then arranged all the nouns, be they related to the victim or to the perpetrators, so they appeared to be falling off right the right edge of the page, and assembled all the verbs so they appeared to be falling

off the left. This solution was a more discerning portrait of rape, of dissociation, wherein people and actions were in freefall.

I had deconstructed a brutal passage from a controversial novel, and saw I had the power to diffuse something hurtful in the dominant culture. I wanted to do more of that, to become an actor in my world. You gave me the permission to play, to trust I would find a form that could bring deeper levels of meaning to the content. The alchemy of that assignment has served me well, especially as a writer. Like design, writing is a process of arrangement, aggregation, of organizing information. I work until the whole is bigger than the parts. I trust the process until the gestalt glistens.

So, if I haven't already said as much, thank you.

Love,  
Bia

*Dear Bia,*

*The way you describe your writing style, as "a process of arrangement, aggregation," would seem to map well onto the way we are talking with each other via e-mail.*

*It is truly a delight for me to hear that an assignment I gave in 1970 could be helpful to you long after. I barely knew what could come from what I was asking and doing with the students who chose to be in the Women's Design Program. I wonder whether my intentions, if told now, would have meaning for you as a writer, or for others who design, make art, or teach.*

*Teaching for me was almost entirely about structuring a situation in which I could question what I had been taught and what was being made and taught by others at the time. In design schools, students taught by teachers steeped in modernism, as I had been, were often given a short text to manipulate formally: first only the size of the type was allowed to change, then space, then weight, and finally an image was permitted to augment the specificity and power of the visual communication. At the time I began teaching, graphic designer Dan Friedman gave his students a weather report to manipulate in this way, and the results were published in *The Journal of Typographic Research*. The work was beautifully cool and elegant. I thought students could learn the same typographic skills by choosing the short texts themselves and manipulating the typography according to the meaning those texts had for each of them, rather than starting with a text to which they might have no personal or meaningful connection. It seemed to me that the resultant work would not look the same as those where formal exploration was disconnected from a particular person's unique connection to the text. It seemed to me that the invitation to choose your own text would reflect not only the diversity of the texts and the depth of connection. The aesthetic aspects would reflect the individual woman's own visual voice. I was quite surprised to learn that a powerful emotional connection to the subject matter can make slow, controlled, formal manipulation much more difficult to do, and to teach; at the same time it was totally*



worth the effort. I saw work that was unpredicted, unique, and particular.

I remember that you chose a section from Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*—the rape of Tralala—a powerful and brutal text about which virtually any woman would have strong feelings. Would it be possible to see yourself as separate from the text, to step back from it, and work with it formally at the same time? I had no idea what visual forms would develop from this investigation, or where teaching in this way would lead.

I am so very relieved and pleased to learn that a process of moving words or images around until the “gestalt glistens”(!) evolved from this. Excellent!

I worried sometimes that the Women's Design Program participants would not bond to design. I was too new to teaching to know that most college students do not go into the fields they study but use what they learn in whichever way their own paths take them. By teaching you differently, I was concerned that each of you was not being inducted into the field of design in a way that would encourage you to become designers deeply connected to your work, as designers and authors, in the way many of my students now see themselves. I tried to show work that I thought demonstrated how people who loved to make things were also looking at society as a made thing.

Love,  
Sheila

Dear Sheila,

The images in the dominant culture were—and continue to be—abusive, targeting the glandular. Images are meant to arrest the viewer, to stimulate reactions of fear, excitement, deprivation or shame. We intended to change the world, but did we want to deliver our content with the same low blows? Or could we combat those images with female values? And if so, what forms would suit our feminism?

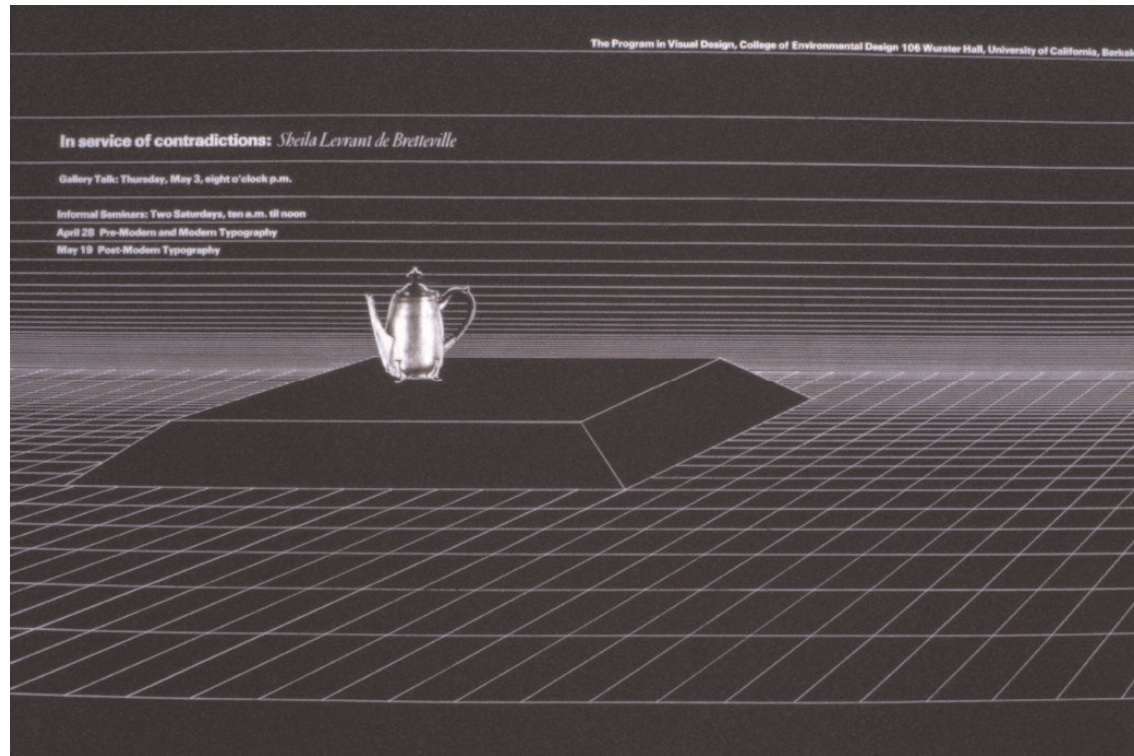
You were all about female values, many exemplified by your use of the grid: a quiet field the viewer can step into and encounter. The grid demonstrates respect for that viewer, her own relationship to information, and her own pace of discovery. The grid is both democratic and participatory. I am thinking now about all our talks concerning democracy and anarchy, and our interest (this, in my memory, was particular to you and me) in the Italian design group, Superstudio.<sup>3</sup> We loved their futuristic posters of landscapes superimposed on a grid, within which people migrated according to their needs or interests, carrying few personal possessions, linked by a world-wide grid of information. Information was to replace materialism, to free us from ownership and therefore from all human bondage.

Twenty-eight years later, I'm living in that utopia, plugged into the Web, migratory between Los Angeles, New York City, and Ireland. The Internet has been the vehicle for a more global/anarchic/decentralized existence, but it has also enabled tribalism to flourish and allowed us to become detached. And at the same time, the



**Superstudio** (Adolfo Natalini, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Roberto Magris, G. Piero Frassinelli, Alessandro Magris, Alessandro Poli) 1970–72. *Fundamental Acts*, from *Life Supersurface*. *Pulizie di Primavera* (Spring Cleaning). © Superstudio 1972.





Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, *In service of contradictions*, 1979. Diazo sepia print 16 3/4" x 24". Photograph by Nancy Angelo. Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.

virtual environment conspires as a collective mirage, making it harder to engage with the difficulties and joys under our noses, within our grasp.

And it's forced us to question the veracity and meaning of so much information, and what controls, if any, we have over what goes out or comes in to our thoughts. We are more mistrustful of information and of discourse...and that bodes ill, I fear.

But now to bed...  
xx, Bia

Dear Bia,

*The slides I showed you in 1971 from Superstudio were also an attempt for me to connect my new life in California with my recent life in Italy. I showed the work that fascinated me: designers who initiated and gave form to subjects that captured their imagination. The Superstudio architects made graphic images and wrote texts that translated what they feared and what they wanted into vivid and powerful metaphors. It seemed to me then, and still*

does now, that Superstudio's dystopias and Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities were capable of inspiring graphic designers who could move the profession beyond status quo positions. I wished I had done what Superstudio had—those visual presentations of fictional cities, which gave form to feared outcomes of current social problems! I optimistically hoped to inspire you and myself to imagine desired, as well as feared, outcomes—I wanted especially to see our hoped-for futures.

I was not nearly as reflective as you might have thought regarding my own interiority, and I had not investigated which of my needs made working with women so compelling. I was aware of pushing myself and my work toward questions without answers much more than acting out of knowing what should be done or what knowledge would be the most meaningful and appropriate to present and transmit to my students. I had read Paulo Freire and wanted to teach in America with this notion of students having as much agency—or more—and as much knowledge—but different—than I had.

In the late sixties, I saw Superstudio's and my own sense of the grid as a metaphor for equal access, a structure for equality. Now the grid is a jumping off place, or some old corset to be thrown off in exchange for more loosely related narrative structures, more loosely connected and sometimes ambiguous and indeterminate relationships of images and texts to one another. Perhaps that is parallel to the indeterminate and loose relationships one has on the Web. Hundreds of people e-mail me and most of them I have not seen! I have a connection with a group of designers in Australia—Tess Dryza and Robyn Stacey at the University of Western Sydney—who are working in their communities with goals much like those that inform my work, and we try to connect online. They saw similarities in what I had written and wanted to explore them in real time on the Net. This kind of communication that brings "virtual" communities of interest together is only partially satisfying. Although I feel "seen" and understood in the way that I understand myself, I still want more. I want to meet them, see them in flesh and blood, so to speak—and they are trying to import me next year! Because I so seldom work at getting published, it is particularly valuable to me to have people halfway around the globe understand the kind of connection and participation I create in the public art work I do now. I look for where in each neighborhood are connections as well as disconnections, and where and how people care for one another. I find this is something I crave and I keep trying to recreate a form to hold it wherever I go to do my public artwork.

Dear Sheila,

I remember you, in 1970, freshly back from Italy, beautiful, pregnant, and ambitious in your ideals. I trusted you instantly. I recognized, though I didn't have the brains to articulate it then, that you had a healthy ego (rare, I think, for leaders, particularly in "minority" movements, where powerlessness and victimization are the road conditions). You created a field for me and the other women in our group to enter and explore. It was real leadership, the power of inspiration and encouragement.

So, of course I followed you from CalArts to the Building, but I was also afraid of it and of what feminism was offering me. I both wanted and feared a sexual relationship with a woman, and I remember when asking you about whether I should go to the Woman's Building, my inquiry was spiked with a kind of prurient anxiety: "Are there really a lot of lesbians there?" You responded with your typical neutrality, probably simply because you've always been secure about your sexuality.

Twenty-eight years after I met you, after I became a grown woman, a feminist, an artist...and a lesbian, I'm still confronted with my capacity for self-denial. How very different from what I imagined I'd be!

And so here we are in reflection, 28 years later. Is this the legendary Saturn Return? The 28-year orbit of Saturn around the sun, and in its wake the life lessons we're bound to reexamine? I know I feel visited by familiar ghosts, by a circularity, but I think it bodes well.

For one thing I believe we'll see a resurgence of feminism. I see its portents percolating in the women around me. I see us stepping into our lives with integrity, intimacy, real power. We are still to do our best works, and I believe we will.

xx, B

*Bia, how could you have seen me pregnant; Jason was born in July of 1970, and I created the Women's Design program in 1971?*

*Sheila*

Dear Sheila,

Hmmm. Perhaps my imagination hankers for a mother image of you? We are not that different in age, yet as my mentor, you mothered me...

I do remember you from the first year at CalArts, before you created the Women's Design Program there. Also, I remember you at an outing the Design School took to Esalen. It was traumatic for me because I didn't want to go into the famous nudie baths and be naked with everyone. I felt that I must be quite hung-up to steel myself away from the crowd. Afterward, Richard Farson, the Design School dean, gave me a lecture on being too uptight.

Yours,

B

*Dear Bia,*

*I am about to go into holiday cooking mode in preparation for a relatively smaller crowd here than in Christmases past. But you have jostled my memory and many of the names of*

*people you knew then strike a warm chord. Not that outing at Esalen though. I did not feel comfortable in the Esalen baths either because I felt too much stripped bare and on view. I was nursing at the time and my breasts hurt and were full. Worse still, Richard Farson (then Dean of the School of Design at CalArts) mentioned them several years later as being splendid! So you were right to demur! I was on show in ways I was not attuned to at the time, nor did I know then how much I resist being on view or in the limelight! It was traumatic and ill considered! Those men were seldom aware of how manipulative and controlling their ideas and processes were. I remember a session at CalArts where Farson had Bill Shuts, the director of Esalen, come to do a workshop with faculty and students. At one point everyone was asked to mill about among one another. When Bill Shuts said, "Stop," whomever you were in front of at that moment was the face you were to explore with your hands. I called him "Bull Shits" from that point on, knowing that this amount of intimacy and familiarity between students and faculty was a questionable thing, especially for me, the only woman in the design school faculty and not much older than most of the students. I was trying to figure out in what ways I was at all different than the students, and this kind of exercise hardly helped!*

*I also didn't go into the pool at CalArts where nude bathing was de rigueur because I did not want to be everyone's first look at a post partum person.*

*Peter and I had only that September returned to the States from Italy, where I had been working for Olivetti in Milan, and I was working as a freelance designer using a desk in the New York offices of Studio Works. I was doing the office logo for the designer John Saladino, and "tchotchkes" for Creative Playthings in New York City, and camping out in friends' apartments. We moved west in early December of 1969. Jason was born at the end of July and CalArts opened in the CalArts buildings that September 1970, which is when I first began to teach.*

*I was ready to have a child, and when I did not become pregnant immediately, I went to a doctor in Los Angeles, who said I had to give my body a chance to get over stopping the Pill and traveling on planes and when I had settled down a bit I would get pregnant. Sound advice, except...I was already pregnant! Jason was born seven months later, and he was not premature according to the doctor who delivered him at Good Sam's [Good Samaritan Hospital]—the only place I could find near my neighborhood that practiced Lamaze "natural childbirth" at the time. It was the beginning of my awareness that the medical establishment did not really know as much as one might think they knew about women's bodies!*

*I was hired to design all the publicity for CalArts while it was being planned in a building facing MacArthur Park, around the corner from the Chouinard Art School. I looked out at MacArthur Park and tried to figure out what being in Los Angeles meant; it was far more foreign to me than Milan. Herb Blau, the provost of CalArts and dean of the Theater School, had arranged for a special issue on the founding of CalArts for Arts in Society magazine. He and the deans were too busy to write the text, and I was asked to put the magazine together, to be both designer and editor. It was the first time I had the opportunity to fully shape the meaning of a publication, to choose which texts and images were in it,*

and sequence both to create what would now be called a “disjunctive narrative.”<sup>4</sup> It was a very exhilarating feeling to be able to fully shape both the content and form of that publication.

To everyone's surprise, Jason came out before the magazine was done. I was spec'ing type in the hospital. My dear friend Marianne Partridge worked closely with me on that publication; she was then the secretary to the PR director of CalArts and had yet to discover her great talent as an editor. She followed me from school to hospital and into our home to finish the magazine during that first month of Jason's life, and became his self-appointed godmother. That fall, when CalArts opened, I began to teach for the first time.

I had been the only woman on the Design School faculty for two years, and by that time I decided I would create a program for women. Dick Farson was no longer dean; Victor Papanek had been his most vociferous critic. I did not trust Victor, although his book featured innovative, adaptive uses of materials in nonindustrialized countries. Papanek replaced Farson as dean. What I remember more than that irony of that succession were the astonishing and egregious comments Papanek made in response to my request to restrict my teaching to two days a week in a Women's Design Program that would run concurrently with the new Feminist Art Program. Victor had two objections. One was that my choice would mean none of the male students would have access to a woman teacher, to which I responded they should simply hire more women teachers. Then he shocked me by giving me permission to do this new program while saying he thought it foolish that I wished to separate out the women because, like the Jews in ghettos, this made it easier to kill them. I was totally horrified by that analogy and considered him a Nazi from that day on. Victor died this past spring, and I have often thought of him on Yom Kippur, when forgiveness is in the cultural air. Oh, it does seem like such a long time ago!

The earthquake of 1971 occurred when graphic designer Keith Godard and architect Katrin Adam were living with us on Waverly Drive. They were the first of many who lived with us for various periods of time. I have come to understand that I was recreating my childhood home where, all throughout my earliest childhood, in the years from 1940 to 1948, a stream of refugees, related to either one or the other of my parents, lived with us. Katrin and Keith thought the flashes and sounds of that earthquake were those of World War II. During that first earthquake experience, I told Peter there was a dog under the bed. After a second or two, he reminded me we had no dog and our bed was a mattress on the floor. All our dishes broke in the earthquake but otherwise I was unfazed by it, and did not link it to the war.

During the first two years at CalArts, I shared an office in the Granada Building on South Lafayette Street with the West Coast version of Studio Works, until Arlene Raven, Judy Chicago, and I created the first Woman's Building around the corner on Grandview.

Love,  
Sheila

Dear Sheila,

The Sylmar Quake forced me to move out of my all-too-private little hole of an apartment and into the dorms at Valencia. There I met my pal, Bernard Cooper, and began to participate, finally, in the curriculum at CalArts, which eventuated in meeting you and finding my way to the Women's Design Program. Finally locating myself in a community of artists and feminists, I realized at long last I had a connection, and an obligation, to make work, to communicate ideas, to make—if it's not too precious to say—art. It was the beginning of a grand and heady time.

I think of the old days at the Woman's Building with both fondness and cynicism. Along with the exhilaration of our actions, thoughts, discussions, works, etc., was the mania of our youth and our inability to examine the darker aspects of our idealization. We were going to change the power structure, yet there was much bullying and victimization, horizontal hostility, and literal braying at the moon.

One of the things I remember about you, and loved you for, was your apparent ability to maintain your Self on the roller coaster. I like to remember (though I know you wouldn't like to be memorialized for this) your participation in one of those marathon “gay/straight” dialogues. Everyone was going around the room in “C-R” [consciousness-raising] fashion and talking about their sexuality in lofty, political terms (the straight women less lofty, less sure of expressing themselves). Anyway, what I remember (or how legend has revisioned the event) is you saying, “I don't know... I like to suck cock, what can I say?” A showstopper. It was the best and proudest expression of a woman's sexuality in the room, explicit and without one mote of apology.

I remember, too, you had a real interest in both the discrepancy and flow between private and public. Twenty years ago, making the personal political was a necessary step in creating change. Now our most banal thoughts and mundane achievements are up for grabs. There is no privacy, no discretion, no life without a public. How our world has changed! Americans have an unfortunate reverence for celebrity and psychology, and a rage for identity that seems nearly nonexistent elsewhere. U.S. feminism seems narcissistic, while elsewhere in the world it is real.

Friends often ask me about women in Ireland...how does such a Catholic country treat women? Well, there have been two women presidents since the founding of the Republic...more than I may ever see in my own country in my lifetime. What does that say about our American hubris, our self-examination, our precious psychological bent, and our ability to make real change?

But back to those days, when the personal was political. I want to talk more about cultural feminism, which was the work at the Woman's Building, and so maligned by political feminists, who felt that art, or cultural work, was...What? Worse than secondary...incidental? Elitist? A diversion from the “real” work of social change?

At the moment, I am thinking about the Incest Awareness video project and what a transformative experience it was for those of us who created that environment or





*Equal Time in Equal Space*, 1980. Collaborative video installation directed and produced by Nancy Angelo. Photograph by Bia Lowe. Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.

who worked on the video, *Equal Time in Equal Space* [ETES].<sup>5</sup> We were working counter to the secrecy and isolation that incest had created in our lives, making community not only out of shared victimhood, but also out of a sharing of labor, skills, and ideas. It was great to be doing something groundbreaking (very little public work had been done on the subject), but also to have taken great care in making it aesthetic. For example, the floor of the screening room was painted pink, to create a warm inner circle, and one could not wear shoes, to establish an environment that one entered with a sense of shared vulnerability.

The aesthetics of participatory democracy, of feminist design, informed the piece. Nancy Angelo conceived and co-produced the project. In it, six women were each videotaped during a series of consciousness-raising sessions concerning their experience of incest—what had happened to them, how it had impacted their lives, how each had shouldered the task of her survival. Nancy had carefully choreographed these discussions so that the broadest range of incest experience would be represented, and that the speakers would reflect a range of class and ethnic backgrounds. During the screenings, the audience was invited to sit inside a large circle of six monitors, each synchronized to play back a woman's testimony and responses, as though interacting in real time. It was a virtual C-R group!

One of the many things that was brilliant about ETES, as we called it, was that it demonstrated the respectful, ritualized listening of consciousness-raising, wherein each participant is given the time she needs to speak without interruption, and in which each acts as a leader. I think that community project had many long-lasting and wide-ranging effects in the culture at large, including the introduction of the term “incest survivor.”

I'm also fondly reminiscing about the conferences in the old Woman's Building on Grandview. Women came from all over the country to attend the Women in Film Conference, Women's Words Conference, and Women in Design, I was gobsmacked by many of the great writers there, including Tillie Olsen, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Meridel Le Sueur. It was a groundbreaking assembly, and an inspiration to young, yet-to-be artists like me. I have a lovely memory of women gathered around the fountain in that beautiful Spanish courtyard, each in lively, intense conversation. With every breath we were making women's culture, and we believed that culture would change lives. Everyone was high on it.

I am also thinking about Val's Cafe and Nan's store<sup>6</sup> and how the Spring Street building kept morphing, kept accommodating exhibitions, enterprises, and tenants. It was glorious. But then, towards the end, it shrank like a sick person in the last stages of a terminal disease. I loved both buildings, loved the spaces like you'd love a lover's body. I felt such protectiveness.

The Woman's Building was emblematic of my own growth and emerging creativity, my own self, and I wanted it to be beautiful...and indestructible!

Grrrrrrrrrr!

Bia

*Good morning Bia:*

*I am in that quiet, tired, peaceful state that comes after an event; we had a party here last night for a friend, the large format photographer, Dawoud Bey, and while I have work I must do this weekend, I have decided that answering e-mail is what I can do for starters. Calling up your e-letter also dredges up my version of the same events.*

*Hubris, gay/straight dialogues, conflating private and public:*

*Perhaps our hubris came from exhilaration, optimism. I felt incredibly freed by leaving CalArts and creating the Woman's Building. I was completely enthralled by what we were doing and what it could mean in terms of equitable, luminous change. I enjoyed the freedom of listening to what I was thinking, seeing, reading, and of having the time and support to listen to myself, to be curious about my own responses. I felt completely immersed in my life but did not know where it was going. I remember Suzanne Lacy was very interested in five-year plans and invited someone to lead one of those magic marker/newsprint discussions. I only knew that in the future I wanted to be doing precisely what I was doing then, and*

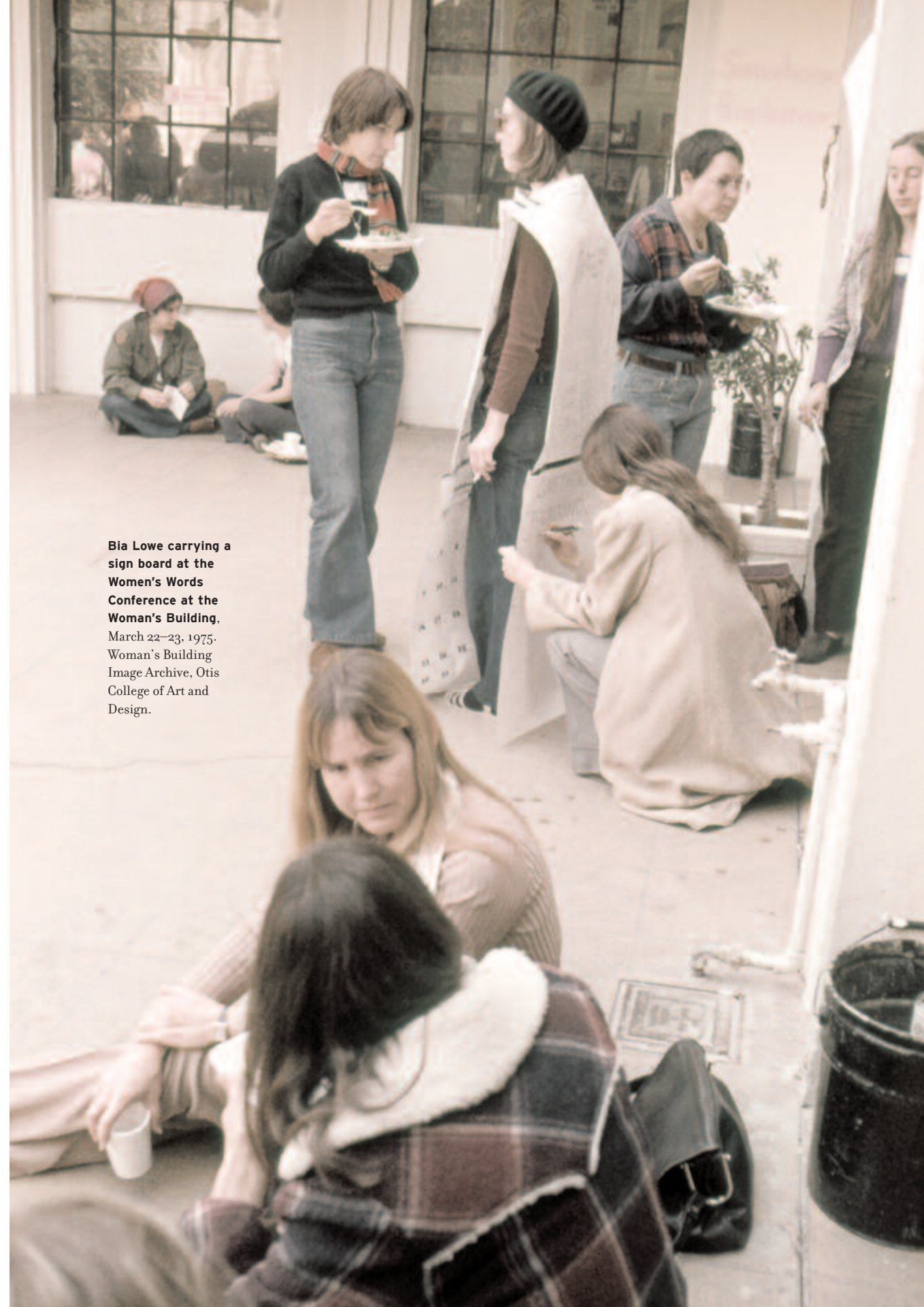


thought that when I did not want to be doing that, it would be time to do something else. For those first years at the Woman's Building, my imagination was captured by the women involved in it; the physical, emotional, and educational structures that we were building to accommodate us; and by the work we were doing and still had yet to do. That sense of possibility, of invention—which needed no explanation or permission—gave our efforts an aura of invincibility and self importance, and produced quite a bit of that hubris you mention, Bia! We certainly had a great deal of naïveté and hubris about our project. At the same time, I think that, in contrast, we worked hard and with seriousness as well. I know that in my own graphic work I was experimenting with forms and underlying structures that could more easily include and accept that which is messy, unconventional, and inexplicable, as well as provide the needed acceptance and acknowledgment that each woman (including me, but largely unbeknownst to me) craved.

My thoughts about my own sexuality were rather ordinary. I did question whether I could have or would possibly have a sexual relationship with a woman. While I found women attractive, and my response was not about making love to them, I was and still am truly attracted sexually to my husband and deeply committed to my relationship with him and to Jason and to the life we were and are constructing together. What I worried about had more to do with being available for women and concerned about how exhausted I felt at the end of the day—the scrambling necessary, the lack of day care, the juggle of getting Jason to and from where he was to be: school, flute lessons, soccer—and being someone who was more than a shred of myself at the end each day. But that was later, when everything began to pile up. In the beginning, at the Grandview building and earlier at CalArts, I could simply bring Jason with me. We campaigned and succeeded in getting day care provided by CalArts, so I then had someplace near me to leave him when I went there. And at the Woman's Building, there were women who entertained and took care of Jason: Phranc, Nancy Fried, and Maria Karras were all very generous.

I remember the performances that dealt directly with lesbian experience at the Woman's Building in the Feminist Studio Workshop. During the early seventies, there was so much talk around me about how heterosexist society was that I began to see all images from that perspective. It seems odd to say this again, but our shared, public environment was full of images that only presented the prevailing, dominant view. Advertisements on billboards to sell almost anything showed smiling women looking up at men. Although I had not written an essay since college, I wrote an article looking at the visual and physical environment for the way in which the genders were presented, with the essentialist goal of arguing for the attributes associated with women to be liberated for use by all. I began to reexamine all my assumptions and sense of comfort or discomfort. I remember Arlene saying, "Comfort is highly overrated." But because of my heterosexuality, I was slow to speak out or act in an environment so largely lesbian for fear that my responses were stereotypical.

Student-teacher liaisons seemed unfairly imbalanced to me regardless of whether the participants were of the same sex or not. Even more difficult for me was when a woman



Bia Lowe carrying a sign board at the Women's Words Conference at the Woman's Building, March 22–23, 1975. Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.



therapist who rented space in the Grandview Woman's Building had an affair with one of the Feminist Studio Workshop students. I put clamps on my outrage to rethink in loco parentis, because my initial reaction was that the therapist and the colleague were taking advantage of their positions of power in relation to younger more vulnerable women.

I, too, remember gay/straight dialogues, and those seemed to pit cultural feminism against radical lesbian feminism in what was, to me, a very rigid, ideological discussion, without respect or interest in different origins, experiences, or ideas. No new ideas ever seemed to come from these encounters. What in particular were you referring to as "bullying and victimization"?

One performance that may relate to the event you recounted involved a student with a banana who did a rather untransformed monologue relating her disgust with the penis. As I watched and listened, I thought, I do not feel that way... I cannot believe I ever said the words "cock sucking," yet "oral sex" sounds like a euphemism. I stayed, I think, in the world of mental image, reluctant to be the heterosexual voice, and perhaps I did a disservice to those students who would have preferred I speak from heterosexual experience and its relation to the dominant culture. I do not remember saying what you heard, but I know the performance and my sense of difference impressed me and made me wonder about whether it was odd that I was there, if anyone else in the group thought as I did. In retrospect, I wish I had spoken and made that part of the discussion. But at the time, I felt that position was abundantly present in the culture outside the Woman's Building, and the women inside did not need it spoken of there.

The flow between PUBLIC and PRIVATE is forever of interest to me and I have, like many other people in the intervening decades, tried to look in a more nuanced way at how these two aspects of myself interweave. Clearly, there is a hunger for exposure and access to the intimate facts with little interest in socially constructed notions we possess, the pathologies at work, or whatever complex needs and desires create these events.

I came to the Women's Movement sans experience with therapy, and while many friends had confided in me, I had not probed my own interiority and had no idea what I felt or thought about much of my early experience. I grew up with a politically left wing father who did not join the Communist party and had quite a bit of anarchist literature in our house, as well as records of Longfellow's poems and Paul Robeson singing "Ballad for Americans." Born in 1940, I grew up during WWII, with my father having repeated heart attacks, my mother having monthly migraines, and our house filled with refugees, many of whom had numbers tattooed on their arms from Nazi concentration camps. I simply lived with that past and barely examined it or the present.

With a big dollop of magic optimism and a disregard for ritual and family of origin, Peter and I thought we were creating our lives, making a family from friends. I thought I saw a mirror of that at the Woman's Building, although some women did this because their families of origin would not accept them as lesbians. I saw the positive, self-affirming aspect of those friendship connections, and saw the pain of rejection as theirs, not mine. I understood

that "private" at the Building meant time to look at past and present experience in ways that would allow each woman to transform and condense her content into art. And when each woman felt her work could be seen by others, then an exhibition could be put up in the Building, and the work would become "public." I do not think you participated in that class I taught, "Private Conversation, Public Announcements," in which women made posters about places in Los Angeles. They created enough of a relationship with the people at those places for their posters to be accepted as publicly displayed statements about that place and that woman's feelings about being there. Each put up her posters in public, and then the "PUBLIC" could become people instead, and each could talk with other people who saw the posters about the work. I have sweet memories of each woman doing this, particularly Jerri Allyn, Rita Wright, Helene Ly, and a tall Dutch woman, Tiny Beunk. I was fascinated by how the content of each poster drove its formal language. We printed them all by the exceptionally inexpensive diazo process. It was one of several projects I did using that red "blue-print" paper because red is a color that demands attention and opens up issues of contested propriety. The confluence of women and the color red in the public spaces of the city evokes associations—old notions of woman's spaces being hidden away, of red light districts, of injunctions to not call too much attention to oneself or risk endangerment. All these associations hovered behind those women's red posters about and for public places.

Thems are me thoughts, m'dear, and now I had better get back to making some lunch and doing some work.

Warmly, and in sisterhood, as we used to say, but it seems so sweet but dated now?!  
Sheila

Dear Pinkie,

...As "Pinkie" you were to many. Your fans—and you had a loyal following Phranc, Nan Fried, Adrienne Weiss, me, Linda Norlen, Susan King, Michelle Kort, Sue Maberry, Cheri Gaulke, all the graphic girls, and many more, all called you Pinkie. It was a great name for you and your determination to use the color.

Pink is, ironically, a kind of dark color for women, shadowy in the Jungian sense, the banner of softness and vulnerability. Pink is the flag of our oppression, and interiority. We resist what it conjures in our desire to assimilate, to see ourselves as strong, immortal, masculine, in control. You were bold to use pink in the vernacular of the public, of printed matter, of the almighty Oz... again the weave of Private and Public. For a time pink was an element of everything you touched, all the Woman's Building calendars, the stationery, and of course, your *Pink* poster.<sup>7</sup>

Your determination to maintain a fluid membrane between the private and the public sphere was compelling. The personal is political, but some of us did not transform our content with the intent of taking it into the public realm. There was an inward focus at the Building, some of it protective and nurturing, but some

self-obsessed. In hindsight, it was not altogether productive. Some of us lost touch with the rest of the world.

In the fever of our youthful idealization, there was a failure to look at the darker side of our natures. I am thinking now of a teacher at the FSW. I don't know if she's the one you referred to. She had a sexualized relationship with a student, a friend. Can I forgive the teacher for her misjudgments, her misuse of power, her probable lack of self-esteem? Can I forgive the student, my friend, for her low self-image? My outrage at that says little for the inward looking and compassion necessary for real change. Here was a situation that conflated power, sex, internalized homophobia—all the struggles we preferred to locate outside the walls of the building. And what did I do? I was angry and saw the teacher as a bad, bad mommy, and I channeled my indignation through gossip.

Making family from friends was wonderful, freeing, and comported well with being young (it is much harder now for me to make new friends.) But it also meant—particularly where acting out was sanctioned by therapies—that many of us were recreating the Woman's Building in the image of an incestuous and abusive household. Many of the difficulties from which we tried to liberate ourselves came home to roost.

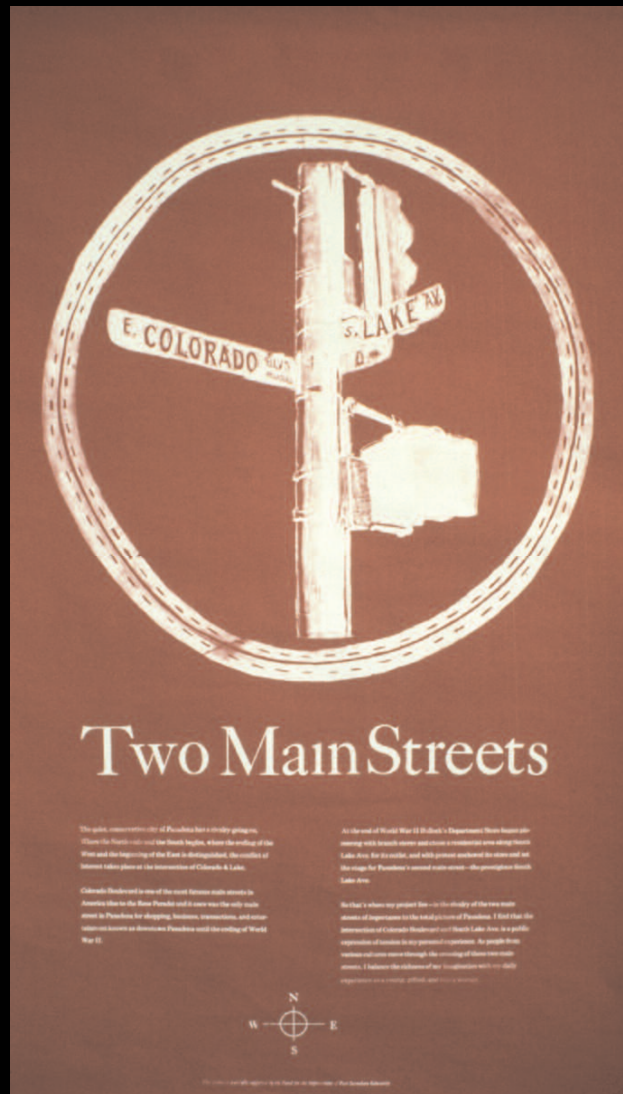
Feminists now have the rap of having been sex-moralizers, sex police. And looking back, that's not entirely a misrepresentation. There was much rigidity and moralizing. That was evident to me in my story of the gay/straight dialogue, the inability of many in that room to accept your sexual nature, as it was so—at least in my memory—directly expressed. I remember sitting in that circle of women and being unable to think of sexuality in terms of pleasure and intimacy, only idealization. My life did not honor pleasure as a value in itself, as an indicator of self-love or care for an "other."

There was a moralism that prohibited the hairy parts of life from cohabitating with our ideals. Nature in its various forms—men, boys (and by some weirdly concocted extension) dogs, sex, power struggle, meat eating, pleasure, anger, etc.—were largely unwelcome at the building. I have never witnessed, nor experimented with, so many varieties of fasting!

A few years ago, I saw a documentary on the restaurant Chez Panisse, another cultural institution born of the seventies, and I got to feeling sad and resentful that people my age were having so much pleasure at that time, eating everything, drinking everything, laughing and talking with dogs and children, and all the many sexes doing all the many things the many sexes do. It was Dionysian in the best sense.

The "Westside women,"<sup>8</sup> as we called them, seemed even further detached from pleasure. I thought they cannibalized themselves with their politics. That kind of rage for purity reminded me of the Conceptual artists I had hung out with at CalArts. They had rationalized themselves out of beauty in order to have the ideal. . . in order to be right. I remember all sorts of threats of boycotts and harsh criticism from the "Westside women" for our cultural bent, for our belief that cultural forms and culture

Left and below, poster and installation view: **Rita Wright, Two Main Streets**, 1981. Diazo poster, part of the "Public Announcements/Private Conversations" project directed by Sheila Levrant de Bretteville. Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.





making are transformative. It all seemed so pointless and annoying to have those women as our adversaries, when really we were all trying to do the best we could.

I think communities can be re-envisioned, still keeping with this beautiful image of yours—of the grid. That is, a congregation of adults who are not endowed with equal gifts, interests, or values, but who have equal access, a true democracy with leeway for individual freedoms, privacies, and styles.

I wanted to touch on the performance you mentioned, the one with the woman eating a banana and talking about her distaste for penises. I don't remember it, but it's a great example, if not the perfect parody, of much of that artwork. Performance art of that period seemed either to be agitprop or tribal magic and ritual, and so much of it was bad, embarrassingly so. The desire to be transgressive, to shock the status quo (as if shock value alone made the art good) was in itself embarrassing.

When I look back, I see a kind of collage of eggs yolks, breasts, self-inflicted wounds, and contrived confessionals. I love reminiscing about those performances, and I need to laugh at them. There is much about those works and ourselves that was beautiful and innocent, disturbing and funny. It hopefully makes us wiser today.

Yours in yolks,  
Bia

Dear Bia:

*Your outrage is powerful and impressive. I feel remiss and dim in contrast. I was gingerly feeling my way in those situations that were unfamiliar and not my experience. I identified and empathized, but because much of what was being said and done was new, perhaps I had a damper on my responses. I did not want to be insensitive and heterosexist. Although I was listening deeply and carefully, I unfortunately missed hearing your rage. Very belatedly I apologize, because, had I known better, I might have found ways to open up the brackets around experience and name the bullying that must have been going on.*

*For me the pleasure was the freedom to question premises. Perhaps I was too drunk on that freedom to check every assumption for its veracity. But something must have blinded me. I wasn't in the know, so to speak, about the struggles with addictions. Living in my extended family where all women worked, I had not known or understood the problems of women in the suburbs who were bored and abused. Although some people in my family have some substance abuse issues and outcomes, I did not think in terms of addictions. I remember coming into the Building with a bottle of wine or champagne to celebrate something and learning that many of the women were in Alcoholics Anonymous. And Ruthie [Ruth Iskin] and Arlene [Raven] were forever on different diets, and Suzanne [Lacy] was eating her "rabbit food." I still ate everything, as I was slender and healthy without any effort to be so. The only problem for me, since puberty, was an anemia that made me faint sometimes and for which I took iron pills and ate all the foods with iron in them: raisins, spinach, broccoli,*

*anything to help. But nothing did until I started to hemorrhage in my early forties; after five years of Chinese herbs and acupuncture and acupressure, I had a hysterectomy and have not been anemic since!*

Sheila

Dear Sheila,

I think the fact that I was immersed in righteous indignation and that you were optimistic says something about our natures (for me, I do not think this bodes well). Your enthusiasm and good will for those around you made you a good leader, an inspiration. I can't imagine how you could feel remiss for not being more sensitive when you were doing so much at the Building and with your family, and finding enjoyment in both to boot. I think I was still hungry for the mirroring and modeling that are absent for lesbians in their formative years, and that, added to the passivity and privilege I came with, made for the bad combo platter. Many of us were struggling with basic identity issues, mommy issues, family issues, work issues; thus our expectations and disappointments were, I think, out of proportion. I think we are all surviving magnificently, and, as I said, I believe many of our best works are still to come.

Thanks for reminding me about all the inebriation. I was only thinking of the temperance. There was a lot of pot smoking and rotgut wine drinking going on, and I'd say, in general, a level of unreality was present. God knows I did my share. Both things were true and coincided: denial of pleasure and soddenness. Maybe it just takes a while to learn how to live a sensual and sensible life, a life of pleasures that is also fully and bravely awake. It was certainly a difficult time, particularly, I think, for those of us who were struggling with our sexualities, not to mention the other challenges that liberation invites.

Yours in wrinkled, but still menstruating, sisterhood,  
Bia

Dear Bia:

*I wanted to say to you, but not necessarily for publication, that the optimism I brought to the Women's Design Program, the Woman's Building, and to each new public art project and class of students here at Yale, has, of course, its other side. I knew little of the other side in the seventies and agreed with Arlene Raven that we were trying to live in the present on an image of the future. That idea was attractive in part because it let me continue to try to control uncontrollable fears I could not handle then, and do a slightly better job with now. I do not have the words to describe my internal structure to others well and simply do not talk about what I cannot understand or accept. Through living with me, Peter—who is different than I in many ways and is not haunted by the same stuff I am haunted by—can add levity*

and humor to the inconsequential stuff that I imbue with terror and desperation. I am doing a terrible job of explaining this to you. Suffice to say that this has little or nothing to do with sexuality and a lot to do with my childhood understanding of the Holocaust survivors in our home, the economic problems and illness with which I was surrounded, and a magic optimism and alchemy I concocted that made me think, far past childhood, that I could transform things into what I wanted them to be, to construct a form or place that would make a magical difference in people's lives. I was so into that magic making that I missed a lot at the Woman's Building: where it did not work and where the victimization and bullying you felt were going on. It is that for which I feel remiss because my job, as I saw it, was to make sure that did not happen!?! Oh, the omnipotence of youth!

Perhaps righteous indignation and magic optimism are not so far apart and bode equally well, or not, for our future. Now I think I have less unconditional good will for those around me as I had then. I am much more aware than I was then of feelings that having, owning, or being anything desirable is dangerous; being visible is dangerous and makes others not only admire and appreciate... but covet, envy, want—and take it all away. How's that for a dark fantasy ever-ready to haunt?! This fear is more attached to being homeless than to being a woman. And "doing so much" was as much an unconscious compulsion to try to make everything better everywhere at the Woman's Building, and with my family, that I missed the ways Peter felt left out, and who knows what Jason will complain about when he turns to examine how his imagination was constructed!

When the woman who ran the travel agency at the building invited me over for dinner one night, and I came there with Jason, I realized that she had a fantasy life in which I played a significant role—seen in the journal she had kept and showed me. I had no idea anyone was looking at me with that intensity, and I was not sure I could handle the responsibility of that attraction. Similarly, one of the FSW women became deeply immersed in her fantastic identification with cats and the letters X and Y, and sent me her drawings and journals for years. When she asked me to come to see her, I brought my friend Jane Stewart, a psychologist, because that level of derangement, with me in a role I did not choose, is too far from what I know how to handle. I did not want to go alone and not know how to be there. When I left Los Angeles, in 1990, I made up a big box of all her drawings and raving writing. I called her and asked if she wanted them back. She did, and I gave them all back to her, happy to see she was doing well.

Jane Stewart often said that none of us had the mothers we needed for the lives we were creating. Rather than dwell on that lack, my thoughts ran to Sonia Delaunay and Florine Stettheimer, and I felt sustained by their work and their lives. As I say that, I realize that both of them were women who started out in situations of privilege, but that was not what I noticed then, or usually! I still adore Florine and came home early last night to watch "Saints in Three Acts," to see her scenery as much as to hear Gertrude Stein's words, Virgil Thompson's music, and the beautiful singing. Florine's pink tinsel cellophane world that I love so much, her flowers, and lithesome sisters, and the privacy she was able to keep all her



Florine Stettheimer, *Spring Sale at Bendel's*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 50" x 40". © Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



life. And Sonia's abundance, perseverance, and her overflowing ability to work in any medium she needed or wanted to: paint, fabric, paper, designing cars, a six-foot-long book, clothing, and advertising. The quilt she made when her son Charles was born was one of my inspirations when I designed the poster about pink and the FSW brochure/poster that preceded it. Their agency and choice, which perhaps were the result of privilege or support from family, were what I wanted and needed, and got vicariously through their work. My family could not provide that; they were distracted by economic difficulties, health problems, and people who had experienced the worst horrors of torture and degradation the twentieth century could provide. We lived near Coney Island, and the abundance of fantasy, cotton candy, sparkling lights, and all the tinsel aspects of streets filled with people always loomed larger in my imagination than the dirty and tawdry parts, the danger, the rip-offs, and the funky surrounding poverty of it all.

I thought there were many models for lesbians: Sappho and Radclyffe Hall, Arlene [Raven], Ruth [Iskin], Kirsten [Grimstad], Susan [Rennie], and the numerous artists being discovered and revealed by lesbian scholars in the seventies. I thought the passivity of privilege could be transformed by these women who were willing to be who they were publicly as well as privately, and to me it seemed they all were able to create their own lives. I thought lesbians at the Building were creating a new kind of family based on choices of those who could and would be there in a time of need—the way the biological family so often could not or would not be for the women who had come to the Building, and cannot be, given the extreme expectations of what we think family should do for us. “Basic identity issues, mommy issues, family issues, work issues” are the stuff we seem to be working on all our lives, not just in our twenties and thirties. Expectations of family that cannot be fulfilled might be seen as parallel to expectations of what the Woman's Building should have provided (even as it did provide sometimes—most of the time?—for some of us?). In an alchemical, magical, optimistic way, I thought the Woman's Building could make everyone into creative survivors, able to live in the world fully as feminists and as women, whatever that category of people is. That thought was possibly one of the ways we led ourselves into disappointment at the Woman's Building—as if the Woman's Building was not just us?! I agree that although there always has been and always will be conflict, ambiguity, extremes and moderation, they are difficult and continue to be unpopular. Let's go with your belief that “Many of our best works are still to come!”

I am in Boston all day Monday with Susan Sellers. Did I tell you a bit about that new artwork project for the Massachusetts State House I am doing there? I will, but doing so reminds me to ask you to tell me more about your books and the way your writing has its origins in your visual making, and how the form, content, and existence of it relate to the discussions within our conversation. In the broadsheet we printed in the Women's Design Program, and at the Woman's Building, we looked for a way to bring what we created in the privacy of the studio into public view, to transform and condense it into art, and to “make it public and known.” How we came to be women who choose to speak out and be heard in

public is helpful to me now, as it is the subject of this project, HEAR US, in Boston.

In June, I had decided I could not do another project if I was to have time to dawdle, gape, think, and let whatever happen during my sabbatical this Spring. But then last June I received a request for my slides from Pamela Worden of Boston's Urban Arts and then a letter asking me to do a proposal to honor six women in the Massachusetts State House. This piece could be another expression of my work about people who have been left out, voices seldom if ever heard, and hidden histories of a specific site. But it would not take place on the edges of cities and out in the public realm, subject to the elements, like *Biddy Mason: Time & Place and Remembering Old Little Tokyo in Los Angeles*; *Search: Literature in Queens*; *Path of Stars in New Haven*; and *At the start... At long last...*, at 207th Street Station in New York City; and *West End Railings* under construction now in Boston. In each I had the freedom to choose where on the site my work would take place and who and what images, texts, people would become public and known. This work [HEAR US] would be in the center of town in a public place, protected, indoors. Evidently a legislator saw a TV broadcast and noticed that most of the American suffragists were from Massachusetts, and the next time he walked through the State House to the legislature he noticed that there were no images of women there. A committee was assembled but they could not decide on one woman and instead decided to honor six. I was told who was to be honored, where the artwork would be, but not how to present them—except that what we did should be fitting with the place. Where does being outrageous fit in here?!

When I read the materials sent to me, I first asked why six women all in one place, why not women throughout the building? It made me angry that we were being put together all in one place, in a ghetto of girls! But then it was at the entrance to the building and would not be missed by thousands of visitors a year! I did not go the obvious protest route. Instead, I tried to think about what people coming to the state house in a hundred years might be concerned with and whether the gender of the people represented would be the vital issue, or race, or something else. Certainly, Boston has had a particularly egregious history of race relations. I thought it would be better to do this project with another woman, in the spirit of sisterhood—past, present, and future. When Carrie Mae Weems responded to my queries regarding collaboration that she would be in Berlin all summer, I asked Susan Sellers to be my partner. I asked her because I like her, she is talented and intelligent, and she is different than me in ways that we could see play out as we did the project: she is almost half my age and would not be subject to a seventies feminist pull on the project. And she has studied women's history but does not see herself as an activist, nor has she been politically involved in the ways I have been. I had begun to think about using marble because there is much marble in the floor of the building, and to make busts of the women in bronze as there are many bronze statues of men, and it would make all the women of color. I kept drawing the women entwined with the marble, and I did not want to make them entwined. They never knew each other and had very different life histories, although they are all from Massachusetts, all born in the nineteenth century, and all public figures and activists. I did not want this project to be only about them

being women, so Susan and I wrote our proposal so that it never used the word woman but rather focused on our desire to make each as different as she was similar and unite them all in their activism. Their public speaking was the subject and therefore this would be less a ghetto of girls.

The Woman's Building, by necessity, was a ghetto of girls. It was appropriate to be that then, but that is not what this new project needs to be about—at least for me and for Susan, but perhaps not as much for the women who worked so hard to choose these six honorees.

Tomorrow Susan and I are going to Boston to meet again with our colleagues who work in stone and bronze and to go the state house with the actual-size model I have made of one of the panels. This will be done for a celebration on October 19, [1998,] in which the scholars who worked on the biographies of each of these six honorees will discuss what they think the women would have thought of the new artwork! I am sending the written part of our proposal as an attachment for your pleasure!

Yours in wrinkled but still coloring my hair sisterhood,  
Sheila

Dear Sheila,

I loved your last e-mail, and p.s., I actually think much of it is very appropriate for publication. It was sad and scary to hear those stories. There was a level of unreality at the Building, and it both protected and encouraged women to act out. I remember when Jere Van Syoc was coming to be the guest artist for the Lesbian Art Project and Maria Bloom<sup>9</sup> was brought to the airport to greet her as her bride-to-be, wearing a black velvet robe and little else. They had never met, but the notion of possibility, and of creating our own lives and living with risk and magic, was in the air . . . so . . . why not? Maria was starting to slip down the slippery slope at the time, going a little bats, but I think her condition was thought to be “witchy.” It was sad and outrageous, though I suppose a case could be made that it was nice that she had a community of people to be in, and that, for a time, she functioned as an important part of it. I think the reason that this all makes me nuts now, and that still makes me cling to my precious moral indignation, is that I participated in it. This is the shadow part of identity politics.

What do you mean when you say “magic optimism”? Are you referring to a fantasy world? Was it cultural, familial, private?

And since you asked: I am going through a complete change with regard to my writing, which I will tell you about later when I have a bit more time. It's an identity crisis!

In sisterhood, complete with white hair, and odd acne (premenopausal?)  
Bia

Happy Valentine's Day, Bia!

This would be a perfect holiday for Florine—pink cellophane and little sparkling, scarlet hearts. Let it be a holiday for us, too; only work if you want to! I participate more often in a kind of “magic optimism,” whereby my fear-driven desire to make the world sparkle takes over, turns me on, and motivates me to make my kind of magic: alchemy on stone, granite, and concrete—permanent, hard materials with which the hidden becomes visible and the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

Sheila

Dear Sheila,

My orientation to writing has been largely one of autobiography. From Deena [Metzger]'s writing classes at CalArts and the Woman's Building, and from the works of most women poets and writers, I learned to trust my impulse to plumb personal content for material. Writers, especially “minority” writers, hone in on forbidden content as the tastiest and most significant. The unexpressed areas in life are, as in the life of the psyche, often the most soulful. At any rate, I married my love of nature writing with my love for confessional, autobiographical writing. I was especially lucky to have Eloise Klein Healy as a teacher. Her passion for poetics and her candor were inspiring and contagious.

I was a happy puppy writing my first book, *Wild Ride*. I was able to stitch together personal experiences with creatures and occurrences outside myself in the natural world. My engagement with the world was ecstasy.

Unfortunately, some of the revelations and disclosures of that book backfired. For one thing, I disclosed privacies about many of the people in my life. I wrote about my lover, from whom I've since separated, as “my mate” and “better half,” and I wrote about her body in very intimate terms—all of which pains me now, and I can only imagine how it affects her.

Recently I've been working on a new book about love, again with the intention to weave natural history with personal history. But this time I'm daunted. I fear it might be destructive to mine real lives and real relationships for material, to exploit privacy for art. How can I honor and protect the privacy of those I love, to secure intimacy, while making an inquiry into the territory? How do I explore the landscape of love without compromising my beloved's privacy, her control over what's public in her life? I've confused privacy with hiding, and wanted to tear down the walls, but at what cost? It's a conundrum.

At any rate, I've reached a crisis with this book, and in general the confessional bent of my work. This inward focus of my work has kept me insular, introspective, and among the navel picking. I really need to have my work challenge me more, push me into areas of research and observation, get me out of myself. Force me to find out what



makes things not-Bia tick. What I enjoyed most about *Wild Ride* was writing about events and creatures, particularly those, like bats, who could use some serious PR and who should be redeemed in our mind's eye, thus making our souls more whole, more rich. What I know from writing poetry is that the natural world provides an extraordinary resource and vehicle for the expression of content.

One of the things I loved about design work is that there is an aspect of it that is entirely selfless, entirely in service of the content and the client. The ego is so tied to language and to telling stories about itself that writing can become a dangerous medium for self indulgence. And sometimes it can trick the writer into thinking she is writing for some higher purpose.

Stitching together the inner and the outer worlds, making a weave, is what I think of as feminine in my work. Making it public has required me to utilize my feminism, to analyze public strategies, and all the interpersonal crap that goes with networking and having a career and dealing with authority. All the people who helped me with *Wild Ride* were feminists: agents, editors, and publicists. Marketing was another bag of worms. My sales suffered from the book being marketed as "lesbian." I wanted it to have a larger exposure, but that was not to be. For better and for worse, this was the market research moment for "Gay & Lesbian Writing," and my little book got squirreled away into the that section. I understand what you meant when you said your new project was not going to be about a ghetto!

Anyway, these are my thoughts lately about my work. I am trying to locate "what" it is I want to write about now...and get back to the ecstasy I felt writing my first book!

Yours in narcissistic career crisis, but unflagging hear-me-roar sisterhood,  
Bia

Dear Bia:

Thank you for this rich and full description of your work and what you want it to be. Lest you think I am pleased with where I am now in mine, I find what I do falling a bit apart. In the 207th Street project, I talked with 207 people in the neighborhood, in the street, in bars, in the park, in the senior citizen centers, and on the phone. The result was a huge number of tiles with about thirty to thirty-five words on each that deliver the history of Inwood.<sup>10</sup> There are other parts to that project that try to make sense of this activity. As it is the first and last stop on the longest line of the A train, I have written large in bits of mirror the words "At the start..." and "At long last..." and the quotes are assembled following those three dots, arranged in the themes that developed through talking with people. There are other parts, too, terrazzo pieces in the floor derived from Taino petroglyphs. A renters' rights organizer in Inwood told me that the Tainos were the Indians that populated the area of the Caribbean from which many in that neighborhood now come. I researched those petroglyphs, and was struck by them: figures smoking (inhaling whatever substances, having

whatever visions) looked like letter A's blowing horns. Billy Strayhorn wrote [the jazz standard] "Take the 'A' Train," and was of African descent, gay, and very private. I asked most people I interviewed about their enjoyment of music. I have a real suspicion that it won't all hang together and that all this talking with people is neurotic on my part and overdone in the world of public art. All the works I have done have involved lots of hanging out in the community, getting close to people whom afterwards I will never see. This has uncomfortable echoes for me and is not what I want to always do. While the Massachusetts project, too, will have quotes that enable viewers to listen directly to the voices of the people honored, there are only six people. Although there is lots of going back and forth between me, Susan, and Ellen Rothman at the Massachusetts Humanities Council and her colleagues, it will never come even close to the amount of time and physical energy I have expended in all my other projects. I worry whether what I am doing is art or design or simply the inordinate amount of pleasure I get from hanging out in these communities and talking with the people I meet there. And I worry if anyone ever wants me to do this work in their community, as they may begin to see that I am not a part of it in ways I forget when I am wherever I go! And I get tired, Bia, and want more and more to have some down time, alone time, private time—if only to rest and to see what would happen without all this people contact. Strange, but when I finish this e-mail and send it off to you wherever you are, I have to go write seventeen letters and get waivers for the seventeen quotes from people who used to live in the old West End of Boston. Their words are to be cut in the steel handrails that will guide pedestrians through a concrete complex that has ghosted into it an abstracted image of their "tenement" with no respect for the quality of the lives led there. Hopefully, those quotes will show what was lost when the neighborhood was razed. And cut into the concrete are eight-foot-high letters that proclaim what was and what is to be THE GREATEST NEIGHBORHOOD THIS SIDE OF HEAVEN. Will I ever stop working on the same thing over and over and over?

But then there is this conversation with you, which when I read it seems delightfully ordinary and extraordinary, rambling and focused, new and old at the same time. I hope it is as tearfully, happily, and hysterically fun for others as it has been for you and me.

Come visit me, Bia, in my round home studio...

In simple sisterhood,

Pinkie

Pinkie,

So, should we talk about the legacy of the Woman's Building?

Love,

Bia

Dear Bia,

*Legacy? I shrink from that notion of us deciding our legacy. It seems self-aggrandizing or institutionally aggrandizing. We who started the Woman's Building and labored within it are perhaps the least likely to know what its legacy might be. That is for those who regard it in the future.*

*Or do you think this is the future now, and we who were a part of it determine its legacy? It was and is my hope that our conversation limited the fictionalizing and aggrandizing of the past by circling in on how we understood what it was we saw accomplished and did not.*

*Participatory democracy<sup>10</sup> captured my imagination before feminism did and influenced my work as much. My use of a fragmented visual field of equal parts owes its formal existence equally to ideas of "women's time," formulated in 1970, and the desire for a form that allowed each person to represent themselves through their own speech. That is true of my newspaper for the International Design Conference in Aspen in 1970, the Pink poster in 1975, and my public art in the 207th Street station of the A train completed last year.*

*Feminism is content, making it possible for the public to listen to women and to understand women's experience, and to learn to value what and who has been overlooked. To the extent that any design carries that content, it can be said to be feminist.*

*Who women are is complex. It is not anywhere as simple a position as our inquiry might have led us to think in 1970.*

*I find myself aligned with Judith Butler and Pedro Almodóvar, and enjoy the notion that gender is totally up for grabs and constructed. At the same time, women are being murdered and raped in Afghanistan solely because they are female, and in the United States, women still are paid seventy-five cents to the dollar paid to males.*

*What I think women need now, or what I need, is not to be limited by any prescribed forms. Design and feminism are splintered. We have gone far from needing a grid to hold an equality of parts. In fact, for me the crazy quilt is a better visual symbol than the grid, as every shape can be in it and it is not in any way adjusted to fit into a prescribed order.*

*In sisterhood,*

*Sheila*

Dear Sheila,

Your point is wise and beautifully articulated.

During my time at the Building, I thought I could see the impact some of our efforts had on the culture at large. The Incest Awareness Project would be a good example. Public discourse was stirred in the local media and that, I presume, had some ripple effects.

On the other hand, it's hard to know to what extent the Incest Awareness Project was a cause of change in the culture, or an expression of an effect already set in

motion. In hindsight, I wonder if, for example, the term "incest survivor" was really ours to invent, or if it already existed in the collective consciousness of the time, if it was already beginning to burble and find its usage in conversations both private and public. To what extent were we the pebble, the ripple, or simply part of the pond? Which isn't to negate or minimize the importance of the Building. That it existed at all was probably its greatest achievement and its most significant legacy. The existence of the Building represented a commitment to women and to women artists (including, of course, designers, musicians, etc.) and to the variety of creative forms those women had developed, or would develop. It raised the level of seriousness about women artists, the way Linda Nochlin's essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971) did. It upped the ante.

[The Woman's Building] was a focal point or a window through which one might witness the effect that feminism was making on consciousness. As such, it would be still fomenting within each of those women who participated in the Building—into how each wove her experience of the Building into a sense of possibility for herself: her sexuality, her ambition and entitlement, her range of content and expression, her knowledge of her history, and her willingness to change.

That's all I'm gonna say right now... , except I LOVE the crazy quilt!

Mucho love to you on this starry night,

Bia

Dear Bia

*I continue to think that we do not determine our legacies. And it is self-aggrandizing to claim we do. Even the notion that the Woman's Building "upped the ante" creates some question in my mind. I feel reluctant to claim what it did for each woman who participated in art making or events there, and I would like to leave it for her to define and express her revisionist history of her experience there. We each weave our own narrative of what influenced us.*

*I prefer the notion that we were part of the groundswell of our time. The Building was a symbol as well as a place, and for each of us, I think, it symbolized something slightly different. I know I idealized the importance of it being a stand-alone building, a separate building with presence. The solidity and stand-alone-ness mattered to me. Cheryl Swannack was a good partner in the building search, and it was with her that the second Woman's Building was found. We both stood on the roof and were filled with an indescribable glee at how big and solid it was. Nothing Judy Baca could say about the gangs nearby could in any way cloud the pleasure I felt when we found it.*

*In some ways, I think of the Woman's Building a bit like all of the public artwork I have done and am doing, in that I am reluctant to say these works create change. Rather, they stand for a desire to reflect and sustain the communities in which they exist—in all*



*their contradictions and complexity. I expect that the Woman's Building and anything I make will mean different things to different people at different times. I totally agree with you that its largest meaning resides in the fact of its existence, and its memory continues its existence beyond its physical presence.*

*Can we two decide to leave this discussion of legacy with the hope that each woman who came to the Woman's Building found support for inventing herself according to her own design?*

*Best to you, dear Bia,  
Sheila*

### Notes

1. For her public art project for the A line of New York's subway system, *At the start... At long last...*, de Bretteville created wall tiles with texts about neighborhood history, large texts created from a mosaic of mirrors, and floor tiles of contrasting cast stone and text. —Editors
2. "Participatory democracy" is a process of emphasizing the broad involvement of constituents in the direction and operation of political systems. —Eds.
3. Superstudio was founded in Florence, Italy, in 1966, by Adolfo Natalini, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Roberto Magris, Gian Piero Frassinelli, and Alessandro Magris. Through their designs, Superstudio produced provocative and subversive visions of the future that were critical to the transformation of architecture and design from the late 1960s through the 1970s. —Eds.
4. A disjunctive narrative is marked by breaks or disunity, so that the narrative is out of sequence. —Eds.
5. Conceived by artist Nancy Angelo, and sponsored by Ariadne: A Social Art Network, *Equal Time in Equal Space* was a multi-system video installation created and exhibited between 1980 and 1982. —Eds.
6. The Store was a thrift shop created and managed by artist Nancy Fried between 1977 and 1979; it was intended to generate revenue for the Woman's Building but also served as a resource for women who wished to explore alternative personae through performance and costuming. —Eds.
7. This poster, created by members of a design class in the early days of the Feminist Studio Workshop, grew from an assignment in which class members were asked to respond to the color pink on a square of paper. The responses, which included typed and handwritten text, drawings, and photography, were reduced in size and quilted together to comprise the poster. Responses tended to explore the social ramifications of the color—the way it spoke to a kind of imposed femininity and women's anger over this. As one respondent scrawled, "Scratch pink and it bleeds." —Eds.
8. The community of feminists who lived on the Westside of Los Angeles tended to be more politically than culturally oriented. —Eds.
9. This name has been changed. —Eds.
10. Inwood Hill Park is largely undeveloped land at the northern most tip of Manhattan Island. —Eds.



**Sheila Levrant de Bretteville**, 1981. Photo by Maria Kellet. Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.



Susan King, Paradise Press Studio,  
1980s. Photograph by Tim Colohan.  
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